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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001942

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: HARIRI DETERMINED TO BE PM

REF: BEIRUT 1936

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Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, based on 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (S) In a one-on-one meeting at the end of a larger session (reftel), MP Saad Hariri told the Ambassador that he was determined to be Prime Minister in the cabinet to be formed after presidential elections. He said that, while in Saudi Arabia a few days earlier, he had a "heart-to-heart" talk with Saudi King Abdullah, who agreed to back Saad. While claiming to be aware of the difficulties to be faced in the upcoming period ahead of the 2009 legislative elections, Hariri said that his bloc's electoral prospects depended on him becoming PM now. The Ambassador noted that some are talking of MP Bahije Tabbarah (Rafiq Hariri's legal advisor) or MP Bahia Hariri (Saad's aunt) serving as PM now, while others muse about Fouad Siniora returning to head the cabinet. Hariri shook his head: "It's my turn. We have a lot to do."

¶2. (S) The Ambassador asked about the "red line" that Michel Aoun and others are trying to define that would prohibit a Hariri premiership. That's Syria talking, Hariri responded. The Ambassador asked what Hariri believed Syria's goals were in having its allies block the presidential elections (despite Syria's presumed comfort level with Michel Sleiman) and complicating the cabinet formation exercise. "Syria wants two things," Hariri responded: Syria wants Secretary Rice to call Syrian Foreign Minister Muallim, and

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Syria wants Saudi King Abdullah to call Syrian President Bashar al-Asad. If those two calls are made, then presidential elections will take place, Hariri predicted. Syria succeeded in getting the French and the Jordanians to engage, but it's more important for Syria to have Saudi Arabia and the United States engage as well.

¶3. (S) But, Hariri added, it would be a "mistake" for the Secretary and the Saudi monarch to comply with what Hariri

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believed were Syrian wishes. Then, Syria would use its allies to block every subsequent step of the process until everyone again asks Syria for help. Step by step, Syria would be rewarded for its allies' misbehavior in Lebanon. Instead, the international community should be returning to

its previous position that Syria would be rewarded when its allies played a constructive role in Lebanon, not before.

14. (S) The Ambassador asked Hariri what his fall-back strategy was, should Syria's allies continue to stand behind Michel Aoun in blocking the election of Michel Sleiman as president. "Don't tell anyone," Hariri counseled, but he planned on relocating with some key advisors and MPs to the Parliament building, to stay there indefinitely to protest the presidential vacancy and draw attention to the fact that March 14 is committed to presidential elections as soon as possible. Drawing a comparison to the March 8-Aoun sit-in in downtown Beirut, the Ambassador noted that Hariri should keep in mind a fall-back strategy, lest he become a prisoner in the Parliament indefinitely, with no face-saving way to withdraw.

COMMENT

15. (S) Despite what Saudi Ambassador Khoja has told us are Saudi reservations, Saad Hariri came across as determined to be prime minister in the next cabinet. Assuming constitutional rules are followed and March 14 unity sustained, that should not -- in theory -- be difficult: unlike with presidential elections (when the ambiguity over the quorum led even some March 14 leaders to question an absolute majority vote), a simple majority can, through a binding consultative process, nominate the PM. But in practice, a Hariri premiership may, in fact, be hard to achieve, particularly if people start buying onto the concept of a package political deal. Michel Aoun has made no secret of his wish to see Hariri step aside, and pro-Syrian politicians here claim that denying Hariri the premiership is justified since Aoun is precluded from the presidency. Undoubtedly, Aoun, Hizballah, and Amal will try to force the choice of PM to go through them rather than through the consultative constitutional process that awards the March 14 majority the right to pick the next PM-designate.

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16. (S) Aoun's opposition to Hariri is genuine: we believe that Aoun's second most coveted prize, after the presidency, is the destruction of Rafiq Hariri and his legacy, given Hariri's post-mortem theft of Aoun's freedom-fighting crown. But we don't know about the pro-Syrian forces. We suspect that they may be trying to raise the price of a Hariri premiership in hopes of achieving greater cabinet weight as a compensatory measure. But at this point, if Hariri is forced by the Saudis or by political deal-making to step aside as the next PM, March 14 will be seen as suffering another defeat, on the heels of its defeat regarding the presidency -- unless the fall-back to Saad Hariri is, as in 2005, Fouad Siniora. We expect, however, that, no matter how distasteful the pro-Syrians would find a Hariri premiership, Siniora is probably at the top of their list of candidates to block.
FELTMAN